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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 DUBLIN 000304

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PTER KISL EI
SUBJECT: MUSLIMS IN IRELAND - A CHANGING COMMUNITY

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Classified By: Political/Economic Section Chief Dwight Nystrom for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (U) Summary: The Irish Muslim community is one of the fastest growing minority communities in Ireland and is one of the major contributors to Ireland's shift from an overwhelmingly homogeneous society to a multi-cultural one. The Irish Government has made some attempts at reaching out to the Muslim community but as Ireland's economic situation has worsened the Government has put its integration and outreach efforts aside- a move that could cause future generations of Irish Muslims to feel alienated from mainstream society. End Summary.

Background and Overview of the Muslim Community

¶2. (U) The first trickle of Muslims arrived in Ireland in the early 1950s to pursue educational opportunities. Many came to study medicine, particularly at the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin. The community saw its greatest growth rates during the economic boom in Ireland in the 1990s. Many of the migrants that came to Ireland at that time were professionals or university students and there was no particular predominance in terms of nationality or region. Today, the community includes Iraqi and Afghan refugees and a smaller numbers of Irish converts. The 2006 census results listed the number of Muslims in Ireland at 32,539. Current estimates indicate that there are approximately 40,000 Muslims currently living in Ireland. The diverse backgrounds and fragmentation of the population has made it difficult for Irish Muslims to establish any kind of official representation.

¶3. (U) The majority of the Muslims living in Ireland are situated in and around Dublin, Cork, and Galway. Small Muslim communities exist in Limerick, Cavan, Ennis, Tralee, and Waterford.

Major Mosques in Dublin

¶4. (U) In 1983 The Dublin Islamic Society acquired property at 163 South Circular Road for what is the oldest mosque in Dublin. Sheikh Yahya M. al-Hussein, a native of Sudan, serves as one of the trustees of the mosque and continues to serve as the Imam. The mosque is the headquarters of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI).

5.(U) In 1992, to cope with the growing Muslim population in Ireland, Sheikh Hamdan Ben Rashid al-Maktoum, Deputy Governor of Dubai and Minister for Finance and Industry in the United Arab Emirates, agreed to personally finance the purchase of land for the construction of a Muslim National School and a purpose-built mosque and Islamic Center in the Clonskeagh area of Dublin. In 1996, the Islamic Cultural Center of Ireland (ICCI) formally opened its doors. The new premises of

the mosque and Islamic center initially fell under the authority of the IFI, but, seven months after the mosque's opening, the Al-Maktoum Foundation requested that the IFI abandon its right to the property and instead reassign it to the foundation. Thus, as the result of a highly contentious court case, the Al-Maktoum foundation has run the ICCI since the late 1990s. The mosque's Imam, Sheikh Hussein Halawa, is originally from Egypt.

¶6. (U) One of the fastest growing mosques is located in the Blackpits area of Dublin. The Blackpits mosque generally serves as the religious center for the South Asian community; the numbers of Pakistani Muslims in Dublin has steadily increased in recent years and the community is becoming one of the largest Muslim groups in Ireland. The Blackpits mosque is supported financially by the Bari family, an influential and politically involved Pakistani-Irish family. The mosque's Imam, Ismail Kotwal, is a Pakistani Muslim who came to Ireland from Leeds in the UK. Kotwal has attracted media attention for his favorable remarks about Osama Bin Laden.

¶7. (U) The Shia Muslim community is considerably smaller than the Sunni community, and there is only one Shia Muslim Islamic center in Ireland. The Ahlul Bayt Islamic Center, located in the Milltown area in Dublin and popularly referred to as the Milltown mosque or the Milltown center, officially opened in September 1996. The mosque's Imam, Ali Al Saleh, is a medical doctor who came from a religious family background.

¶8. (C) Siraj Zaidi, an interpreter at the office of the Minister for integration and a member of Ireland's Three Faiths Forum, told Poloffs that that Sheikh Hussein at the IFI is a reasonable man who is working hard for the Muslim community, but that he is not good at controlling the growth

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of conservative or extreme movements. Zaidi also noted that the ICCI is good at building bridges but is very contrived and controlled because of its relationship with the UAE. The ICCI leadership, in Zaidi's opinion, is detached from its own community and is often taken by surprise when problems arise. When there are problems, such as when ICCI members were known to be celebrating after Margaret Hassan was kidnapped in Iraq, ICCI leadership attempted to disassociate itself from the issue. Zaidi told Poloffs that Blackpits Imam Kotwal as an individual is not a harmful character, but is only preaching what he understands as correct. He added that the Blackpits mosque is a sign that the Pakistani community in Ireland is beginning to separate itself out.

Interaction between the Mosques

¶9. (C) Generally, the ICCI tends to have a middle-class base, while the IFI is considered to be more working class. Norma Murphy, Principal of the North Dublin Muslim School, told Poloffs that the struggle over control of the ICCI created a &world war8-type relationship between the IFI and ICCI. While the tensions have calmed in recent years, Murphy characterized the current relationship between the two mosques as a &cold war8-type atmosphere. Murphy added that the IFI, which lacks the funding of the ICCI, has asked her to act as an intermediary with the Embassy of Saudi Arabia to attempt to secure Saudi funds to cover the IFI's financial responsibilities for the Muslim school. Declan Hayden, manager of the Intercultural Relations Unit at Dublin City Council, told Poloff that the Muslim community is continuing to struggle with the split between the ICCI and the IFI.

¶10. (C) The ICCI is widely viewed as the face of the Muslim Community in Ireland to the Irish government, media, and mainstream Irish society because it is the largest Islamic institution in the country and the best funded. Father Kieran Flynn of the Irish School of Ecumenics at Trinity

College Dublin told Poloffs that at the grassroots level there is a feeling that the ICCI has assumed a role of leadership that it does not necessarily deserve and that it is not representative of the entire community. The ICCI does not seek out the opinions of other Islamic institutions while serving in this representative role and often takes a decidedly Arab perspective on issues. Several members of the Irish Muslim community have confirmed this sentiment to Poloffs, pointing out that because the ICCI has financial ties to the UAE it is not free to look out solely for the best interests of Irish Muslims.

¶11. (C) The Muslim community has made several attempts at setting up a representative body for the community. The Irish Council of Imams, established in 2006, is the most recent effort. However, the council only meets sporadically and is not authoritative. Milltown mosque member Mohammad Ali told Poloffs that the ICCI often calls meetings on short notice and does not provide an agenda in advance, making it difficult for council members to prepare. Moreover, Ali noted that because the Shia community in Ireland is so small, the Milltown center is often outnumbered during majority votes.

¶12. (C) The Milltown center is critical of some of the ICCI's decisions and is not comfortable with the ICCI's status as the representative organization for Muslims in Ireland. At the same time, the Milltown center does not have the resources to establish a strong communications mechanism comparable to the ICCI's. Ali feels that the ICCI does not take a sufficiently strong stance against global extremist violence and would like the ICCI to make its positions more clear. Ali added that the Milltown center has worked closely with the ICCI on issues of mutual concern closer to home. For example, when Ali heard that a small number of children at the ICCI Muslim school were absent from school and visibly sad when al-Zarqawi * a senior al-Qaeda member * was killed in Iraq, the Imams at the various mosques worked together to speak with the families and address the issue. Ali added that the notion to mourn the death of al-Zarqawi is not coming from the school, but instead from the children's families.

A Superficial Relationship with Leinster House...

¶13. (C) The Irish Government looks to the ICCI as the voice of the Muslim community. This renders the Islamic communities outside of the ICCI and especially outside of Dublin dependent upon the ICCI as its representation to the political authorities. Government officials generally visit the ICCI annually on Eid, and several members of the Irish Muslim community have commented to Poloffs that it seems as

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if the Government is taking an easy and comfortable route by engaging only with ICCI and that the wider Muslim community would like to see that the Government recognizes that there is an Islamic community beyond Clonskeagh.

¶14. (C) Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern expressed interest in interfaith and diversity issues. The Office of the Minister for Integration was established during Ahern's tenure in 2007 and Ahern was also responsible for the formation of Ireland's three faiths forum. Several members of the Irish Muslim community told Poloffs that since becoming Taoiseach, Cowen, distracted by the economic crisis in Ireland, has not been heavily involved with or taken an active interest in Muslim integration.

¶15. (C) Former Integration Minister Conor Lenihan was generally seen as ineffective and insincere. Both members of the Irish NGO community and the Irish Muslim community told Poloffs that Lenihan (the brother of Finance Minister Brian Lenihan) likely secured the position because he comes from a political family and seemed to be using the role as a

platform for moving up in the Government ranks. They added that he did not seem capable of comprehending the complex issues associated with integration. John Curran took on the integration brief in April 2009. Curran also is responsible for Ireland,s national drugs strategy and community affairs but Irish NGOs and the Irish Muslim community are cautiously optimistic that he will be more capable and engaged.

Currently, the Minister for Integration does not have the authority to affect change on the issues that matter most to the Muslim community * health, education, and employment. It is unclear how the Minister,s role will develop in the future.

¶16. (C) Most government engagement is happening at the local level, and officials from Curran,s office told Poloffs that Dublin City Council (DCC) serves as a model for integration programming. Currently, the Integration Office pushes funds down to the local level and has given local councils the freedom to distribute grants on their own discretion. In 2008, DCC used a Euro 25,000 grant to fund approximately 30 different integration organizations. The Integration Office is likely to change this scheme in the coming years as it evaluates each local council and determines which programs have been the most effective.

...A Tighter Integration Budget...

¶17. (C) Ireland,s faltering economy has paved the way for cuts in Government spending on integration programs. The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism(NCCRI), which had proactively pushed integration programs and produced literature for the benefit of the Muslim community and other minority groups, closed its doors in December 2008. A number of NGOs receiving Government grants fear further cuts will follow. Largely because the Muslim community does not have any official representation in the government, its members rely on NGO groups as a link to the Government. The Integration office is currently reviewing its programs in light of the economic situation and has revised some of its schemes to be more cost effective. For example, the office is planning an anti-racism poster program for public transport rather than launching a costly media campaign.

¶18. (C) Representatives from the Irish Refugee Council, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, and the New Communities partnership believe that the Government takes a very short-sighted approach to handling immigration and diversity and that both the Government and mainstream Irish society have an undercurrent of suspicion towards the new communities in Ireland. Itayi Viriri of the Immigrant Council of Ireland commented that he was not sure that mainstream Irish society would react favorably to public spending on integration programs during economic recessionary times. All three representatives noted that they believe the Government is expecting immigrant communities to return to their home countries. This is in spite of the fact that in some cases, particularly in the case of the Irish Muslim community, the country is now home to second generation immigrant populations.

... And an Apathetic Attitude towards Political Engagement

¶19. (C) By all accounts, the Muslim community has not been politically engaged for a number of reasons. The older generations of Muslim immigrants are still tied to their home countries and are uninterested in issues affecting Ireland. In other cases, some immigrants are afraid to become politically active because of their experiences in their home

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countries. Parents in the community often discourage their children from studying politics and instead encourage more traditional professions such as medicine or engineering.

According to several members of the Muslim community in Ireland, Muslims are generally content with their situation and are seeking to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Liam Egan, an Irish convert, expressed his frustration to Poloffs because the mosques in Ireland are proactive in arranging protests on international issues such as Gaza and the war in Iraq, but are very reluctant to take a stand on issues closer to home because they fear possible backlash.

¶20. (C) Shaheen Ahmed, a Pakistani immigrant and Fianna Fail Party Member who failed to secure a local council seat in the 2009 elections, told Poloffs that Muslim electoral candidates are at a disadvantage because of Ireland's strong pub culture and history of political nepotism and republicanism. Zaidi stated in a meeting with Poloffs that the Muslim candidates failed in the 2009 local elections because many of them did not fully understand or appreciate the party they were running for or the Irish political system. Moreover, the candidates did not address the issues that their electorate cared most about.

¶21. (C) Irish political parties have started reaching out to migrant and minority voters but have not specifically looked at the Muslim community. Both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael hired staff to reach out to the Polish community for the 2009 local elections but did not attempt to reach out further to other communities. This is likely due to the comparatively small size of the Irish Muslim community and, according to a Fine Gael policy adviser, that, therefore, Muslims are unlikely to impact an election. A Labor Party official told Poloffs that the party has difficulty running immigrant and minority candidates because Labor already has longstanding party members selected for Labor strongholds. It is difficult to give new candidates a meaningful chance in an election because they often have no choice but to run in areas in which they will surely lose.

¶22. (C) Some Muslim candidates have seen success in Ireland's political arena: Moosajee Bhamjee became Ireland's first ever Muslim Member of Parliament in 1992. Bhamjee's stance opposing the closure of Ennis hospital and his involvement with the community through his psychiatry practice were major factors in his election. Bhamjee told Poloffs that it is up to the Muslim candidates to establish roots in their constituencies and build support based on local issues. Bhamjee chose to stand down from the Dail in 1997 to return to his profession. Dr. Mazhar Bari, a prominent academic and Irish citizen of Pakistani origin, ran for Dun Laoghaire county council with the backing of the now defunct Progressive Democratic Party in 2004 and lost by a margin of just 110 votes. Bari, whose family funds the Blackpits mosque and who currently represents Ireland at the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, told Poloffs that running for local council was a positive experience and that he hopes to run again in 5 to 10 years.

The Generation Gap and Resistance to Integration

¶23. (C) Many of the second and third generation Irish Muslims are struggling with balancing their religious beliefs and their parents' expectations with popular Irish culture. Parents are overwhelmingly afraid of their children integrating too fully into society because of the strong pub culture and Catholicism that exists in Ireland. Murphy told Poloffs that some of the parents at the North Dublin Muslim School have been particularly resistant to programs in the school designed to facilitate integration and Irishness.⁸ Murphy added that some of the parents in the school have held on tightly to their traditions despite living in a western society. For example, Murphy has heard from the children that some of the parents are taking on second wives even though it is illegal in Ireland. At least in part because of this sentiment, a generation gap is emerging between Irish born Muslims and their immigrant parents. Doaa Baker, a young Iraqi-Irish Muslim, told Poloffs that she finds the mosque leadership in general to be judgmental and out of touch. Mohammad Ali of the Milltown center told Poloffs that

it has been a challenge teaching the Irish Muslim youth that they can engage in Irish society while also upholding their culture and religious beliefs. He admitted that the center had lost some of its teenagers to alcohol and drugs.

¶24. (C) The religious nature of the Irish school system is a major issue for Irish Muslims. Muslim students can opt out of prayers in school and Catholicism courses but often the schools do not have the resources to move the children into a separate classroom. As a result, Muslim children often sit through religion classes without participating. Dr. Faheem

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Bukhatwa, head of the board of the North Dublin Muslim School, told Poloffs that this gives Muslim children a sense that they are the "other" and is not helpful from an integration standpoint. Bukhatwa added that employment opportunities are not always equal in Ireland and expressed his concern for the Muslim youth if the school and employment situations are not corrected.

¶25. (C) Norma Murphy told Poloffs that she believes a number of Muslim immigrants find Ireland attractive because of the generous social welfare benefits and that Government should do a better job of educating the Muslim community on what is expected of them in a Western society. She opined that the immigrant community would not recognize that it should organize or participate in society unless the Government pushed it to through educational programs provided by the mosques.

Some Positive Signs

¶26. (C) The Garda (the Irish police force) has taken positive steps by assigning approximately 400 liaison officers to work in the force's intercultural office. The officers meet with representatives from the various immigrant minority communities on a regular basis. The Garda has established a positive relationship with the ICCI and Buckhatwa told Poloffs that the force is one of the better organizations in Ireland in terms of planning for the future.

¶27. (C) Second- and third-generation Irish Muslims, for the most part, consider themselves Irish and identify with Irish society more than their parents, nation of origin. Several Muslim immigrants told Poloffs that they would not return to their home countries simply because their children would refuse to return with them. Mohammad Ali of the Milltown center noted that when he spends time with the Irish Muslim youth the subjects of conversations and jokes are decidedly Irish. He also noted that the teenage generation was particularly responsive to his personal campaign to encourage Muslim participation in the 2009 local elections. Moreover, several members of the Irish Muslim community have opined to Poloffs that integration needs to be a priority both for the Muslim community and for Irish mainstream society, and recognize that the Muslim community could do more to reach out to the Irish Government and to become more involved with society.

Comment

¶28. (C) Overall the Muslim community in Ireland is content and moderate, but local government officials, NGO workers, and some members of the Muslim community itself have expressed concern that the situation in Ireland could eventually mirror the situation for Muslims in other European countries if the Government does not take a serious look at its integration and outreach efforts and policies. Ireland has the distinct advantage of being able to look at the integration strategies that other countries have taken and evaluate which strategies will fit its situation best. Because the number of Muslims in Ireland is so small, the community has effectively self-regulated and acted quickly on

any sign of problematic elements. It is all too aware that any negative action from the margins of the community would reflect badly on the entire population. The Irish-Pakistani population is continuing to grow and is likely to build stronger ties with the Pakistani population in the UK. As the Muslim community in Ireland writ large continues to grow, self-regulation is likely to become more difficult and will require greater engagement with other elements of Irish society.

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